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SUBJECT: STILL A HARSH WORLD FOR WOMEN IN WESTERN AFGHANISTAN

¶11. (U) Summary. Despite Herat's status as the most modern Afghan city, western Afghanistan remains deeply conservative and women are still forced into arranged marriages, suffer beatings and abuse at the hands of family members, and resort to self-immolation as a means of escaping their plight and exerting the last measure of control over their lives. Womens' non-governmental organizations (NGOs) provide islands of sanctuary and hope, but traditional values, lack of education, and poverty continue to severely limit women's rights and safety. End Summary.

Full House at the Women's Shelter

¶12. (SBU) Herat has only one safehouse/shelter, which was established in 2003. The shelter is now run by the Voice of Women (VOW) NGO at the request of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and funded by the Danes. The shelter offers sanctuary and tries to negotiate solutions for anywhere from 25-50 short-term and long-term residents. The women and girls are referred to the shelter by the police, immigration authorities, the Ministry of Labor, the Department of Women's Affairs, UNHCR, or other assistance organizations. So far in 2007, the shelter has assisted 151 women: 29 deportees (six remain in the shelter); 19 victims of domestic violence (four remain); 35 runaways; 11 homeless; 19 prison release (three remain); five voluntary returnees from Iran; 28 family conflicts (two remain), and five internally displaced persons. The shelter currently has 13 long-term and 12 short-term residents. The long-term residents sometimes stay as much as 18 months while waiting for a court to decide if they can divorce their husbands. The short-term residents can stay as briefly as a few hours, often just needing help in defusing a family problem or finding relatives after being deported alone from Iran.

Death by Dishonor

¶13. (U) The stories are depressingly similar. Most girls were between the ages of 14 and 18 when their families forced them into arranged marriages, often with elderly Afghan men living in Iran with several wives and grown children. The girls either escaped before the wedding and were beaten, or escaped after the wedding and were beaten. The girls are generally from western Afghanistan and are often Hazara; all were illiterate and from poor families. One girl was beaten and tortured by her brother-in-law. He is now serving time in prison, but her family would still kill her for dishonoring them if she returned home. Another resident who recently returned to her family was beaten to death by her father

and brother.

¶4. (U) The girls live in two large rental houses separated by a broad, clean courtyard, but the gate is locked between the rear, long-term resident house and the street-side, short-term resident house. Children, three of whom were born in the shelter, played in the courtyard amidst laundry and scraggly trees. The shelter has no outward identifying sign, and residents generally keep or are kept to themselves. A few are allowed to go to the bazaar in groups if accompanied by a supervisor, but others are kept inside for fear they will be kidnapped or killed as soon as they step outside.

Harshly Judging Each Other

¶5. (SBU) The girls seemed generally happy and well cared-for, but they do not seem to trust each other. None of the girls would tell us their stories unless all other residents and even staff had left the room. The director said many girls came to the shelter initially claiming they had been trafficked for prostitution, but social pressure and criticism from the other women soon caused them to recant and fabricate a traditional forced-marriage story. This pressure to remain "good" may be at the heart of allegations of sexual abuse at Pol-e-Charkhi prison made by female inmates to a visiting Afghan parliamentary delegation in October. The inmates denied these allegations to subsequent parliamentary and Ministry of Justice delegations soon afterwards.

What the Future Holds: Marriage, Marriage, and Marriage

¶6. (SBU) Even if the girls could wait out the mandatory three-year period required to obtain a divorce, they must marry again for protection. Being a single woman in Afghanistan and living outside your family circle is simply not an option. The shelter director

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contacts the families and pursues the only three possible alternatives: 1) return to the girl's family to be married off again; 2) return to the girl's husband; or 3) an immediate arranged marriage to another man. The girls seemed to accept this future, and had no other ideas of what they could or would do with their lives if allowed to choose.

Tea Rooms and Tea Cosies

¶7. (SBU) While the girls wait for their fate to be decided, they occupy their time with educational and simple livelihood programs (e.g., knitting). Some also worked in the shelter's Finnish Embassy-funded tea rooms "for women, by women." The most successful tea room is in a curtained but airy little restaurant in Herat's central park, where female university students cram in to study and gossip and men stand at the door to order takeout. The employees make \$80 per month (teachers make \$60), and are escorted, burqa-clad, by male shelter guards to and from work. The girls said the students often befriend them and they enjoy this one break from their relative isolation at the safehouse.

Self-Immolation Is Still Seen As The Only Way Out

¶8. (U) When they cannot escape continued violence or forced marriage, some girls attempt suicide by self-immolation. We visited the 36-bed Herat Burn Unit, which was created partly to cope with the high numbers of self-immolation victims. Cases are decreasing slightly; the hospital treated almost 150 patients each year in 2003, 2004, and 2005; 98 patients in 2006; and 62 patients so far in the Afghan year of 1386, which ends March 31. Nevertheless, the women's ward was full, and women and girls between the ages of 12 and 30 lay in various ghastly stages of treatment and recovery. Some were disabled along with being disfigured, and doctors feared they would attempt suicide again. Family arguments, desperation, and extreme mental distress were present in all the cases. One twelve-year old girl was horrifically burned from the waist down and claimed her skirt caught fire in the kitchen but the U.S. Air Force medic accompanying us said the severity of her wounds was inconsistent with her story.

¶9. (U) While the women were receiving the best burn treatment

available in Afghanistan, the unit still lacked basic pressure garments, clean bandages, and enough supplies. Only seven well-trained professionals worked at the burn unit, including two plastic surgeons. While the USAF medic noted the high quality of the skin graft work, we could not watch, or listen, as an unskilled nurse roughly stripped off the caked-on bandages of the twelve-year old instead of soaking them first. According to the doctors, Americans built the building, the French supplied it and trained the doctors, and the Afghan government funds the salaries. But the doctor said the government salaries were only \$50 per month, and money even for that was running out. He feared the unit would close in less than a year without a substantial new funding source.

U.S. Military Often Provides The Only Medical Care Available to Women

¶10. (SBU) U.S. military medical personnel at Camp Stone, a Forward Operating Base near the Herat Airport often offer the only medical treatment available to women in the area. Their "medcap" (Medical Community Assistance Program) missions often see evidence of sexual abuse, self-immolation, and physical abuse such as blown eardrums and skull deformities from victims being hit repeatedly in the head.

Kuchi women - often married at 14 and seen as mere reproducers and workers - suffer the most severe abuse. The medical personnel said most village elders show more appreciation for the veterinary clinics than the medcap missions. Only American units conduct medcaps; the Italian and Spanish units in the area focus on other assistance goals, and medical NGOs like Doctors Without Borders have pulled out of Herat due to security concerns.

Women's Council: A Hope for the Future

¶11. (SBU) The Herat Women's Council is one Afghan-run women's NGO dedicated to raising awareness about self-immolation and women's rights in general. The Council was formed by 200 former female principals and intellectuals shortly after the Taliban's fall. At that time, self-immolation cases were extremely high, and the

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Council produced a magazine and public service television programs about the rights of women and the danger and senselessness of self-immolation. The director noted that self-immolation did not exist in Afghanistan before the wars, but was brought from Iran when refugees began returning. The Council is supported entirely by donations and what they earn from their livelihood classes. Local contacts said some friction existed between the Council and the Department of Women's Affairs (DWA). The Council's director declined to comment on this, but she did suggest the DWA could do more to protect women. We tried to meet with the DWA but were stood up twice.

Iranian Women are the Vanguard?

¶11. (SBU) Interestingly, two of the women at the leading edge of women's rights were either Iranian or Iranian-educated. One Iranian woman, now a British citizen and married to a Frenchman, runs the international five-star hotel in Herat, aptly named, "The International Five-Star Hotel." Arriving in the dining room without a headscarf, she said she has been harassed, threatened, and discriminated against both because she is a woman and because she is a foreigner. She says she refuses to be intimidated and will continue to build her hotel's business in the face of the local Chamber of Commerce's open hostility. (We also heard rumors that the hotel was Iranian-government run and stocked with Iranian secret agents.) The young woman who headed the Women's Council was Iranian-educated, and seemed to be an independent thinker and not easily intimidated. Her conviction and straight-forward approach were refreshing, and she is a bright spark amidst so much misery and oppression.

¶12. (SBU) As Herat and western Afghanistan continue to develop, women will face an increasing clash of cultures. Internet cafes, opulent new houses, satellite television and, lest we forget, the International Five-Star Hotel, are all impacting Herat's conservative community. Whether the region becomes a beacon of progress or a place of continued oppression remains to be seen, but

women's rights face a long uphill battle in either case.

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